

Child support services face cuts

■ Some say
reductions could
hurt local families

GIG CONAUGHTON
STAFF WRITER

SAN DIEGO — The county is preparing to cut \$6.8 million from its Department of Child Support Services, the office in charge of collecting and distributing child support payments for up to 136,000 local families.

County officials said last week that the proposed budget cuts won't mean less money for single parents trying to feed, clothe and care for thousands of San Diego County children.

But some officers from the department said it could hurt families to cut the budget of the agency that ensures divorced and biological parents pay to raise their kids.

They said the agency, which deals with one out of every six San Diego County

North County Times
Escondido 06/28/2004

► **CHILD**, A-4

Cont.,

► CHILD

Continued from A-1

residents, already has more cases than it can handle. County officials said the department collects only about 41 percent of the child support money that courts order to be paid. The national collection rate was 58 percent in 2002, according federal child support officials.

"Already in my everyday conversations with parents I have to explain that our department is in a backlog, and that it may take a few more months before we can implement his or her court orders," child support officer Charisma de los Reyes said recently. "How does a parent explain a backlog to their child?"

De los Reyes is one of 124 child support workers facing layoffs on July 8 because of the proposed budget cuts.

County supervisors are

scheduled to begin three days of budget deliberations today. The supervisors could adopt a 2004-05 budget, based upon \$153 million in state funding cuts proposed in January, that would not only reduce child support collection services, but also cut drug- and alcohol-treatment services, mental health services, Sunday hours at libraries, and some supervision of juvenile criminals.

Harold Tuck, director of the county's public safety group, said last week that the county's child support services department relies totally upon state and federal funding.

He said proposed state cuts have forced county managers to recommend shaving the child support service group's 2004-05 budget by \$6,788,900 — from \$54.44 million to \$47.66 million — and laying off 124 of its 690 workers.

Because of the looming budget cuts, the agency had

already left more than 100 positions vacant. The department had also cut travel, training, printing, overtime and other expenses.

Tuck and other county leaders' said last week that they were still hopeful that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state legislators will ease the proposed child support cuts when they adopt a 2004-05 budget.

Last month, Schwarzenegger actually proposed giving counties back some of the money he initially planned to cut from their budgets in January.

But county officials said they can't count on getting any of that money until state legislators approve a new budget. Even then, they say, they're not sure where the money would be used because so many programs are facing budget reductions.

In the meantime, Tuck said, the looming cuts won't hurt the county department's per-

Cont.,

formance or reduce collections for local families.

In addition to collecting and distributing child support payments, the agency locates non-custodial parents, establishes paternity, modifies court orders for child and medical support, and enforces child and medical support orders.

Tuck said that to cope with the cuts and the increased caseloads the layoffs will put on remaining workers, the department will spend less time working to reimburse the state welfare system.

John Rosenthal, a department spokesman, said the state's welfare system routinely pays child support payments owed to single-parent families on welfare rolls until child support officers can track down dead-beat parents who fall behind in their payments or don't pay at all.

When child support officers eventually track down the parent and start collecting support from them, some of

the money goes to paying off what the welfare system has spent.

Tuck said county officers won't spend time tracking down parents to repay welfare expenses, but will instead devote all their time finding parents and collecting money for non-welfare families in their program.

He said that will ensure that collections for local families remain constant, and prevent new families from being forced to enroll for welfare or other social programs.

But others are skeptical.

De los Reyes told supervisors at a recent budget hearing that if the cuts are approved, "We will not have the manpower to do our job."

Other child support officers facing layoffs agreed. Jubilee Garner told supervisors that the department routinely handles nearly 1,500 calls a day and that it received 1,900 calls as recently as June 7.

Darlene Smiley said indi-

vidual officers already handle up to 100 calls per day.

Even Rosenthal said last week that it was "hard to imagine" that the county department's performance would not suffer.

He said the department had worked hard in recent years to improve its collection rate, which was as low as 27 percent about five years ago, and that if nothing else, fewer officers could stall improving the current 41 percent rate. Rosenthal said two years ago, the department had plans to hire more people, in the hope of becoming "fully staffed" with roughly 790 workers. The proposed layoffs would shrink the department's staff to roughly 495 people.

"We're definitely going to have to prioritize a little differently to minimize the effect on San Diego families," Rosenthal said. "I'm not here saying that we're going to be able to do the same job with 500 people."